Balance and Continuity, Please.

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Balance and Continuity, Please.

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This has been a difficult editorial to write, because it requires that we publicly recognize a failure at the Berglund Center. For the several years we have generally prided ourselves on a series of successes. We now have an audience of more than a thousand readers a day, have moved steadily up in search engine listings, have had a number of public acknowledgements of the value of our offerings, received a variety of grants, presented a number of conferences and workshops and so forth. But now we must announce that we have been forced to cancel our planned third annual summer workshop built around the work of the Berglund Fellows.

This cancellation is particularly galling to us because this year’s Berglund Fellows are outstanding. The work that they are doing promises to be of interest to a very large audience and will, we believe, inspire others both to follow up their research and to add to it. We will be publishing their work as planned in future issues of Interface.

But the hard reality is that we have had too few applications from those wishing to attend to merit holding the workshop as a public event as we have done for the last several years. It is not that we expected to make a profit of any sort; we have always supported the summer workshop with a variety of scholarships and other incentives, viewing it as part of our outreach functions. And it is not that we have not made every possible effort to assemble an audience; we made the largest effort we have made in three years to communicate with potential participants, both electronically and via a large-scale mailing.

But a major segment of our audience has always been educators. This year, educators in particular have been very hard hit by economic and political changes. Many schools at all levels from K-12 through colleges and universities have been dealt severe blows by shrinking resources as the stock market and their returns on endowment decline. Local school districts have lost critical tax income as state and local taxes have shrunk with the declining economy. The federal government has passed many fiscal burdens to the states. And the first to feel these effects are always the schools.
Judging from the systems we know best, the West coast states of Washington, Oregon, and California, teachers have lost the funds necessary to pay for continued education and for travel. We know of several cases where “wired” teachers who have accumulated machines and software through painful and laborious efforts are now finding that their districts can no longer support the small classes or the labs necessary to do teaching in electronic environments. Private foundation funding to support such educational activities for schools and teachers has also declined markedly, just as more applicants are surging forward, hoping to support operations formerly supported by local funding.

This is the first year we have seen since the development of the Internet that graduates of education programs with good skills in computing are not easily finding employment. At present we are helping a variety of highly qualified young teachers find jobs teaching in Taiwan and in China, which are each eager to hire them.

And, of course, experienced teachers themselves have also lost substantial personal income as school days are shortened, weeks chopped off the schedule, and many classes and activities discontinued. They are less able to pay for travel and for workshop fees and more likely to be seeking summer part-time employment. Many teachers have either been laid off or are so threatened by uncertainty that they do not see the merit of continued investment of personal time and resources in what seems to them to be a declining industry, education.

And nor, we personally feel, can these problems be said to be accidental or unintended ones. Teachers and schools are not simply the victims of some sort of drive-by economic incident. Rather, the federal government has dramatically changed the relationship between the central and state governments. Increasingly, monies flow up while responsibilities flow down. In addition, federal funds and attention are lavished upon security issues and foreign wars while we pay here at home with the spiraling decline of our most fundamental activities. State governments are currently in the worst financial condition they have been in since the great depression. Neither is there any indication that this problem will do anything in the near future other than grow worse as all possible sources of funding are exhausted.

It is too early to say that this is a long-term trend, nor should we extrapolate too much from the difficulties in this one activity at one site like the Berglund Center, but we can say that we believe that many core activities are being neglected as the economy fails to pick up and we simultaneously rush to man the barricades both here and abroad. Can we not have some balance and continuity, please?

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Editor, Interface.

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